

***The Working Poor: Invisible in America* by David K. Shipler (2004)**

Overview

According to the 2015 US Census estimate, 43.1 million people, or 13.5% of the population live in poverty.¹ Poverty thresholds are the income dollar amounts used by the U.S. Census Bureau solely as a statistical yardstick to determine a household's poverty status. Thresholds vary according to the size of the household and the ages of its members, and are updated yearly.² So who are these people?

Shipler examines the lives of several hard working individuals who are existing on the brink of demise. When you live paycheck to paycheck, minor issues such as car repairs or an illness can mean missed work and lost wages. If you don't make enough to save a little, this shortfall can result in taking a high interest payday loan in order to pay the rent or buy groceries. This financial insecurity limits the poor to substandard housing and inexpensive food options, which affects the health and development of their children. Children who come from poverty tend to do poorly in school thereby perpetuating the cycle.³ So who's to blame?

Poverty is a complicated issue that has many interwoven causes and effects. Shipler dissects several of these issues, but more importantly, he shines light on the often overlooked struggle of the working poor on whom many of us depend.

Why was it banned?

According to the Texas Observer, the novel has been challenged due to the depictions of rape, abortion, and the questioning of capitalism.⁴

Discussion questions⁵

1. What degree of responsibility toward people in poverty is held by the government, by private industry, charities, or individuals? What is Shipler's perspective on this?
2. Poverty both causes problems and results from them. Do you believe there is any way to break the cycle of poverty? Do you think the suggestions Shipler makes in Chapter 11 are plausible?
3. Shipler talks about the American belief that if you work hard enough, you can get ahead. When people fail to succeed in life do you believe it is the fault of the individual or society?
4. What is your response to Shipler's assertion that the kind of low-wage work performed by the working poor makes life more comfortable, easy, and more affordable for middle class and upper middle class Americans?

¹ <https://poverty.ucdavis.edu/faq/what-current-poverty-rate-united-states>

² <https://poverty.ucdavis.edu/faq/what-are-poverty-thresholds-today>

³ https://www.washingtonpost.com/posteverything/wp/2015/04/28/the-real-reason-why-poor-kids-perform-worse-in-school-and-in-life/?utm_term=.bccf0a8439e0

⁴ Texas Observer <https://www.texasobserver.org/banned-books-week-highland-park/>

⁵ Random House lesson plan <https://www.randomhouse.com/highschool/resources/lessonplans/workingpoor.html>

5. As a society, we often attach certain stereotypes to people according to their socioeconomic class. What images of the working poor do you hold? In what ways did Shipler work to reverse common stereotypes?
6. In what ways does housing limit the chance of escaping poverty? What is the relationship between housing and health?
7. Do you think this book is appropriate reading for high school students?

Similar works

Evicted: Poverty and Profit in the American City by Matthew Desmond

Nickle and Dime: On (Not) Getting by in America by Barbara Ehrenreich

The Short and Tragic Life of Robert Peace: A Brilliant Young Man who left Newark for the Ivy League by Jeff Hobbs

Hand to Mouth: Living in Bootstrap America by Linda Tirado

Recommendations for additional information

“A Poor Cousin of the Middle Class” by David K. Shipler

<http://www.nytimes.com/2004/01/18/magazine/a-poor-cousin-of-the-middle-class.html?pagewanted=all&src=pm>

“Ban Before Reading” by David K. Shipler

<https://www.nytimes.com/2015/11/08/books/review/ban-before-reading.html>

ALA 100 banned books website

<http://www.ala.org/bbooks/frequentlychallengedbooks/classics/reasons>